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DE RUEHGB #4108/01 3511828
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 171828Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4909
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 004108

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/17/2017
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SUBJECT: COR ISSUES UPDATE

Classified By: PolCouns Matt Tueller 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Iraq's Council of Representatives (COR) is scheduled to reconvene on December 30, following its three week hiatus for the Hajj and the Eid holiday. It has the Budget Law and Accountability and Justice (i.e., the de-Ba'ath law) to deal with during the January extension of its regular term. Attendance and participation by COR members varies greatly from member to member. Some, including party and bloc leaders such as former prime ministers Jaafari and Allawi, rarely show up at all. Efforts by the COR leadership to tighten up attendance have had little effect. Deputy Speaker Al-Attiya is among the most committed to whipping the COR into shape, even taking the matter public earlier this month. Speaker Mashadani lacks the same commitment, sometimes speaking loudly on members' failure to attend but carrying a small stick. But the bottom line for us is that the COR's absenteeism problem, serious as that is, is not at the root of delays in passing legislation or the failure to do so. Once behind the scenes political arrangements are done, the COR leadership and key bloc and party leaders will round up the necessary members to have legislation passed. It is the tortuous route to reaching the point where a vote can be held that bedevils the process and disappoints and frustrates Iraqis and outside observers alike. End Summary

¶2. (C) The Iraqi Council of Representatives (COR) is the country's unicameral parliament. Its 275 members reflect the ethnic and sectarian make up of Iraq. Between 40 and 50 percent are Arab Shia; Arab Sunni and Kurd members each make up around 20 percent; the rest are a potpourri of Turkman, Yezidi, Assyrian, Shabek and other minority representatives. The COR members are in office as a result of the December 2005 election and were sworn in on March 16, 2006. They are serving four year terms. There is a constitutionally mandated eight-month annual term, divided in two. COR bylaws set the start and end dates of the spring and fall terms on, respectively, March 1 to June 30 and September 1 to December

¶30. The COR as a whole is convened intermittently during these terms, with many days set aside for committee work (there are 24 COR committees), go on official trips, or other tasks. The COR meets in what used to be Baghdad's convention center; office space for members and committees is makeshift. Security is tight and enforced strictly since a suicide bomber got into the building in April, killing one and injuring many others. The COR's guard force is now entirely Kurdish Pesh Merga.

¶3. (C) Attendance by the Iraqi representatives at COR sessions and the seriousness with which they take their responsibilities vary widely by member. On any given day, there are between 100 and 150 members absent. The requirement for a quorum of 138 members is oftentimes not met. The COR, however, can continue to discuss draft laws and conduct other business even in the absence of a quorum so long as the previous day's session was continued and not closed. The Speaker, Mahmoud Mashadani, and the First Deputy Speaker Sheikh Khaled Al-Attiya (who is often in charge), frequently resort to this parliamentary maneuver to reconvene sessions

and maintain some COR momentum. Actual votes do require at least 138 members present. But the COR leadership and principal figures in the various blocs can and do round up the necessary numbers of members in order to pass key legislation. It's the slow and tortuous route taken to the point where a vote can finally be held that is frustrating and sometimes inexplicable, both to Iraqis and outsiders.

14. (C) The COR's twin two-month breaks and the large scale absenteeism together give the impression of leisureliness and inattentiveness that stand in marked contrast to the urgency of the country's problems. Compounding the problem this year (as last) is the current three-week unscheduled December hiatus for the Hajj and the Eid Al-Adha holiday. The COR's last session was on December 6 and it is not scheduled to resume business until December 30. The current term will be extended into January. The COR did not pass the budget before it adjourned and is required by the constitution to return to work on that. It also has the Accountability and Justice draft before it, something that Deputy Speaker Al-Attiya said would be on the January agenda. The COR presidency (the speaker and his two deputies) have tried to tighten up attendance. Absent members' names are now read at the beginning of each session, fines for unauthorized absenteeism have been raised, and the speaker has even threatened to suspend members for not showing up (probably an empty threat given constitutional protections that members enjoy). But these measures seem to have had modest, if any, effect. Members, for instance, will sign in as present (or have others sign in for them) and then fail to appear during the day's session.

15. (C) Deputy Speaker Al-Attiya, among the most consistently hard-working members, went public with strong criticism of members' Hajj pilgrimages on December 5 and then directly confronted them during that day's session. The members' reaction was instructive. A representative who loudly

rebutted Sheikh Khaled, blaming the GOI for the lack of legislative progress and claiming that Khaled was giving the COR a bad name before the public, was applauded all around. Also instructive, the next day Speaker Mashadani abruptly and without explanation cut short proceedings, adjourned until December 30, and began making his own plans for a Hajj trip.

16. (C) We asked for and received COR absenteeism figures for this year (March 12 through July 30 and September 4 through November 19). There are three absence categories: approved leave, sick leave, and unexcused leave. We have translated and sorted those by political bloc and sent the raw tabulations to NEA/I. We are seeking figures through the December 6 end date. These numbers have some, if limited, utility. From our own observation of COR sessions we can see that far too many members are shown as having zero absences, making the basic statistical practices underlying the data questionable. Nonetheless, these figures do give us a reasonable idea of who is not showing up. One fact that stands out (and matches our own observation) is that some bloc leaders and party leaders are among the worst offenders. Well known figures such as Ibrahim Al-Ja'afari (Dawa), Ayad Allawi (Iraqiya), Salih Mutlaq (National Dialogue), Adnan Al-Duleymi (Tawafuq), have poor attendance records. Former PM Allawi is likely the worst offender of all, the one COR member who may never have attended even one session. Abdul Azez Al-Hakeem ((UIA/ISCI) has a lengthy sick leave record; many other members also have dozens of sickness related absences. The figures tend to support our observation that the Kurds are the most consistent attendees.

17. (C) Accurately judging COR attendance records is hard enough, but less difficult than identifying who voted for what. Votes are done by a show of hands that are counted by the two &rapporteurs8 who sit below the speaker and deputy speakers. &Recording8 of the votes is captured on video tape and archived. Sessions are filmed in their entirety by internal COR employed cameramen and only edited versions of the proceedings are provided to the news media for broadcast. Security concerns make members wary of having their votes made public. While there is an electronic system for vote counting in the chamber, it is not in use. We understand that it has not been activated, at least in part, because it would enable members to vote sight unseen by their bloc leaders,

something the latter will not accept. Under these circumstances, votes are predictably along bloc lines, with the Kurds, once again, being the most consistent in their voting patterns.

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